Sweet Bird of Youth Study Guide

Sweet Bird of Youth by Tennessee Williams

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Introduction

Though Tennessee Williams's *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959) was his biggest box office success since *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), the play came to be regarded as an example of the playwright in decline. It was his second-to-last big success. Even before it opened on March 10, 1959, at the Martin Beck Theatre on Broadway, *Sweet Bird of Youth* had $390,000 in advance sales. The original production closed January 30, 1960, after 375 performances.

When the play opened, the frank depictions of various corruptions were considered somewhat shocking. Touching on familiar themes for Williams (including lost youth and aging, loneliness, sex, and pretending to be what one is not), *Sweet Bird of Youth* was inspired in part by his own life, though not autobiographical. Williams had written at least eight versions of the play. One version was published in *Esquire* and another, with only two characters (Chance and the Princess), was performed in Miami, Florida, in 1956.

From the earliest Broadway production of *Sweet Bird of Youth*, critics disagreed about the play. While some saw it as another example of Williams's prowess with language and character, others found it disjointed, disorganized, and distasteful. Critical opinion generally declined over time, though scholars were interested in how the play fit in with the rest of Williams's career.

Writing about a 1975 revival of the play, Edwin Wilson of the *Wall Street Journal* wrote

Sweet Bird of Youth is not considered on a par with Mr. Williams's best work, but it has its share of his power and magic both in the characters he has created and in the music of his words. No other writer of the American theater offers the lyricism Mr. Williams does, and it can be heard here. . . .

Author Biography

Williams was born Thomas Lanier Williams on March 26, 1911, in Columbus, Mississippi. He was the son of Cornelius Coffin and Edwina (maiden name, Dakin) Williams. Williams's father, a traveling salesman, was rarely home. The children and their mother lived with her parents in Tennessee until 1918. That year, Cornelius Williams moved the family to St. Louis when he was hired as the sales manager for a shoe company. Though Cornelius Williams was abusive to his family, his son found solace in writing, an interest of his since childhood. By the time he was in high school, Thomas was publishing short stories in national magazines.

After graduating from high school in 1929, Williams entered the University of Missouri at Columbia. He considered becoming a journalist, but was forced to leave school after two years because the Great Depression had limited his funds. Williams went to work for his father's employer, the International Shoe Company, and was miserable. He returned to college for a year at St. Louis's Washington University before being forced to drop out again. Williams finally finished his degree at the University of Iowa in 1938. He dubbed himself Tennessee Williams in 1939, based on a nickname he acquired at Iowa because of his southern accent.

Williams had written plays as early as 1935, some of which were produced locally. He won the Group Theatre prize in 1939 based on a sampling of his plays. This prize led to wider recognition, as well as to a Rockefeller Fellowship in 1940. Williams was able to make his living writing, including a half-year stint as a screenwriter for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in 1943. The experience and form did not suit him, and Williams turned to plays fulltime by 1944.

In 1944, Williams had a massive hit with the play *The Glass Menagerie*, which made his career. He won numerous accolades for the work, which had some basis in Williams's own life. Between 1944 and 1972, Williams produced more than a play every two years, many of which were extremely successful. He won the Pulitzer Prize for drama twice. The first to win was what many critics consider his best play, 1947's *A Street Car Named Desire*, followed by *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). One of Williams's last big box office hits was 1959's *Sweet Bird of Youth*.

After *Night of the Iguana* (1962), Williams's plays differed in form and content from earlier ones, and many were not critically acclaimed or commercially successful. Many were seen as derivative of his earlier work. Williams suffered a mental collapse in the late 1960s, spending several weeks in a psychiatric hospital. His last minor success was in 1972 with *Small Craft Warnings*. Williams continued to write plays as well as novels and short stories until he choked to death on February 24, 1983, in his New York hotel suite.

Plot Summary

Act 1, Scene 1

Sweet Bird of Youth opens in a hotel room in St. Cloud, Florida. In bed are Princess Kosmonopolis (the alias of aging actress Alexandra del Lago) and Chance Wayne, who has come back to his hometown. While the actress sleeps, Chance drinks coffee. George Scudder appears at the door, wanting to know why Chance has returned. When Chance informs him he wants to see his mother and his girlfriend, Heavenly Finley, Scudder tells Chance that his mother recently died and was buried, and that something has happened to Heavenly. Scudder had tried and failed to contact Chance about these matters. Scudder also warns Chance that he had better leave town before Heavenly's father and brother come after him. Before leaving, Scudder reveals that he will be marrying Heavenly soon.

Chance awakens the Princess. The Princess struggles to remember who he is and where they are. It becomes apparent that Chance is her gigolo. She has been drinking heavily and using hashish, which has contributed to her memory lapse. The Princess talks about being a middle-aged actress who does not want to retire. She has recently made a movie, and when she went to the premiere, she was horrified by herself on screen. The Princess is still on the run from this experience. As her memory returns, the Princess remembers how she became involved with Chance.

The Princess wants to know what Chance wants from her. While she was in her stupor, Chance had her put him under contract with a Hollywood studio of which she owns a part. The Princess tells him that the contract has loopholes and can be invalidated. When the Princess tries to seduce him, Chance pulls out a tape-recording he made of her discussing how she smuggled hashish into the United States. Chance attempts to blackmail her into signing traveler's checks to him. The Princess is offended, but she tells him that if they make love right now, she will give him some money.

Act 1, scene 2

The Princess signs traveler's checks for Chance, but insists that she will go with him to cash them. She is afraid to be left alone. As she puts on makeup, Chance tells her his life story. He was popular here. Instead of going to college, he went to New York and was in the choruses of Broadway shows. Chance also made love to many rich women in New York, giving affection to the lonely. During the Korean War, Chance joined the Navy because the uniform looked good on him. He felt he was wasting his youth, and had a nervous breakdown. After his honorable discharge, he returned home and again become involved with Heavenly. Though they were in love, Heavenly's father, Boss Finley, would not let them marry.

Chance asks the Princess to help him by staging a phony talent contest, which he and Heavenly will win. Chance will then take Heavenly to Hollywood. The Princess does not want the publicity. Instead, she sends him down to cash the checks. Chance wants to show the town he is not washed up, and promises to return with most of the money and the car. The Princess allows him to go, hoping he will come back.

Act 2, scene 1

At Boss Finley's house, Heavenly's father is angry that Chance has returned. He calls in his son, Tom Junior. Finley wants his son to throw Chance out of town because the last time he was here he gave Heavenly a sexually transmitted disease that required her to have a hysterectomy. As they talk, Tom Junior informs him that Chance Wayne has stopped outside and is talking with Aunt Nonnie. Tom Junior calls for Aunt Nonnie, who runs into the house. The Finleys question Nonnie. Though she says she will get Chance to leave town, she also defends him, telling Finley that he was a nice boy before Finley destroyed him.

After Nonnie leaves, Tom Junior becomes upset with his father. Finley is running for re-election with Tom Junior on the ticket. When Finley points out Junior's failings, he strikes back with a reminder that Finley keeps a mistress, Miss Lucy, at the hotel. Tom Junior reports that Miss Lucy has said that Finley is too old to have sex. Finley becomes upset by these words.

Heavenly finally appears. Finley compliments her on her beauty. When Finley tries to suggest how she should behave, Heavenly becomes angry. She reminds him that he drove Chance away and tried to marry her off to a succession of old men. She blames him for Chance's corruption. Finley tries to buy her off with a shopping spree. He also insists that she will be at the televised rally that night at the hotel. When Heavenly refuses to go, he informs her that Chance is back in town, and that if she does not appear, Chance will be harmed.

Act 2, scene 2

At the hotel's cocktail lounge, Miss Lucy tells the bartender that Boss Finley smashed her fingers with a jewelry box for her comments about his sexual performance. The Heckler enters. When Miss Lucy learns of his intentions to bring up Heavenly's unfortunate past, she offers to help The Heckler get into the Finleys' rally.

Chance comes into the bar. Aunt Nonnie soon follows. She informs him that he must leave town. Chance shows her the contract with the Princess's studio and tells her about the talent contest. When Nonnie emphasizes the danger he is in, Chance informs her that life is not worth living without Heavenly.

Chance runs into old acquaintances at the bar. They do not treat him well, but Chance does not understand what has changed. Miss Lucy enters and talks to him. She knows the truth about Chance's life. One of the old acquaintances tells Chance about the

Finley rally that night and what it is about. When the old acquaintances leave, Miss Lucy offers to take Chance to the airport.

The Princess appears, disheveled and incoherent. She chides him for leaving her alone. As Hatcher, the hotel manager, approaches them, Chance insists on taking the Princess upstairs. Boss Finley and Heavenly enter the hotel. Chance and Heavenly come face to face. Before they can say anything, Finley drags Heavenly away.

Though the Princess wants to leave, Chance has to deal with Hatcher and Tom Junior about what happened to Heavenly. Chance demands an explanation from Tom Junior. Tom Junior informs Chance that Chance gave Heavenly a disease and that it will affect the rest of her life. He tells Chance to leave town before midnight or he will be castrated. Chance gets the Princess to go to her room.

Miss Lucy and Chance watch Finley speak on television in the lounge. The Heckler asks his awkward question about Heavenly's operation. Afterwards, he is beaten. Heavenly is horrified by his question, and collapses.

Act 3

In the hotel room, the Princess is on the phone demanding a driver. Hatcher and his cronies force their way inside, insisting that she leave. She tears into them. Tom Junior enters, demanding to know where Chance is. She says she does not know, and Tom promises to get her a driver. After the men leave, Chance returns. Chance assures her that he is still her driver, though he is in no state to drive.

The Princess tells Chance that she wants him to accept his life with her. Chance calls a Hollywood gossip columnist. The Princess speaks to her and learns that her movie has done very well, which will allow her to make a great comeback. Chance intended for her to tell the columnist about two rising future stars, meaning him and Heavenly, but the Princess does not. The Princess makes plans for her return. As the Princess prepares to leave, she wants Chance to come with her. He will not leave. They both realize how time has affected them. The Princess leaves, and Tom Junior enters with other men to deal with Chance.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

The play opens in a room at the Royal Palms Hotel in the town of St. Cloud, somewhere on the Gulf Coast. A handsome young man named Chance Wayne is rising from a big bed in which a woman still sleeps, a mask covering her eyes. A knock at the door reveals a waiter with coffee and Bromo. Church bells begin to chime amid the sounds of morning birds. Chance didn't know that it is Sunday, and the waiter clarifies that it is Easter Sunday. As the waiter leaves, George Scudder, an old friend of Chance's, pushes his way into the room telling Chance that the night manager had phoned him to tell him that Chance is back in town.

George is now Chief of Staff at the hospital and is due in surgery in a few minutes. He wanted to tell Chance a few things and then wants him to get out of town as fast as he came. George tells Chance that his mother had died a couple weeks ago; apparently, Chance had not received any of the telegrams about her illness or her funeral services. Chance pauses for a minute or so at the news, but his real interest is in Heavenly, the girlfriend he left in town.

George ignores his question about Heavenly and pushes on to tell Chance that he had also sent him a letter about a certain girl undergoing an awful experience because of him. If her father and brother find out that he is back in town, there is no telling what they will do. Chance still demands to know about Heavenly and George tells him that he is engaged to marry her next month. After he is gone, Chance tries to call Heavenly, but the maid who answers hangs up as soon as she hears his voice.

Chance is brought back to the situation in the room as the woman begins to stir. She wants to know who he is, where she is, and where her oxygen is. Chance brings her an oxygen tank and mask and she calms down a bit after inhaling for a few minutes. The phone rings and it's the hotel manager asking him to depart. Chance mentions that Miss Alexandra del Lago will not like that. The woman demands that he not use her name and forces him to hang up. The actress wants a pill and her vodka, and as he searches the suitcase, he takes a minute to turn on a small tape recorder.

The woman can't remember who Chance is or how she hooked up with him, although she thinks he is a fine specimen. Chance tells her that she employs him to take care of her. They met in her cabana at a hotel in Palm Beach and he gave her papaya cream rubs. It all starts to come back to her now and she comments on the noise the gulls are making outside.

Alexandra orders Chance to find the heroin in her suitcase and he's curious to know how she got it through Customs. She tells him that she didn't; a doctor gave her injections for her neuritis on the ocean liner while some young man brought it back for her on a plane, later trying unsuccessfully to blackmail her. She begins to remember the

situation that has put her in her current emotional state; she had ventured an acting comeback and was jeered in the theatre at the movie's premiere. Her humiliation forced her out of the theatre, where she tripped in her haste and ran away. The next thing she remembers is waking up in this room this morning.

Chance tells Alexandra that she had offered him a movie contract when they were in Palm Beach; she even had the papers drawn up with all the right signatures. She lets him down when she says that it was all a fraud and those papers wouldn't hold up to anything. That's when he reveals that he has taped their conversation about her heroin smuggling and he wants money in exchange for the tape. Alexandra is still the consummate actress at heart, however, and tells him he will not win and she will now tell him the terms under which he may remain employed; Chance is never to speak about illness or death and the only way for her to forget the words is to be distracted through lovemaking. She is now ready for her next distraction.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

There are two critical literary elements introduced in this first scene. It is not only a Sunday morning, but Easter Sunday, a time symbolizing rebirth and a fresh beginning. It's not clear yet who or what will be reborn and there's also the possibility that the date is ironic in that both these characters are beyond redemption, at least according to what has been revealed so far. Probably the more obvious symbolism are the shadows and noises of the birds, first the pleasant morning birds before any dialogue before the characters, and then the hawking of seagulls when Alexandra is raging and their interactions are more heated.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

Alexandra, whom Chance calls Princess, is signing traveler's checks over to Chance. He is impatient to cash them downstairs and be on his way for the day. She tries to keep him with her as long as possible and invites him to tell his life story as she puts on her makeup. He tells her that he was born in St. Cloud but always had an itch to leave, to do something else. All the kids he grew up with have settled down but he didn't want that. Chance never had the money or privilege that many of his friends did and was anxious to get away and find his own success.

While moderately successful in acting and modeling in New York, Chance realizes that his real talent is with the ladies, especially middle-aged women whose youth he could temporarily restore. His tour of duty in the Navy ended early due to anxiety related to his fear of losing his youth and looks and therefore his career. That's when Heavenly became even more important to him. He has experienced the greatest pleasures of his life with her and nothing can ever change that, past or present; she is the constant in his life and he is back to claim her.

Chance's plan involves showing Heavenly his movie contract and driving around in Alexandra's convertible all day. Then, he and Alexandra will drive to New Orleans, where she will hold a press conference announcing a contest to find two young people to star in a new film she's planning because she has so much faith in youth. Ultimately she will decide that he and Heavenly will be those two people and they will go to Hollywood together.

Alexandra is not interested in any publicity at the moment though, and tries to dissuade Chance. He tells her that he will return her car and what's left of her cash tonight in the hotel parking lot and he will leave to be with Heavenly. The Princess is disappointed that she has hooked up again with another con man and watches wistfully as he leaves.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

Chance's motivations are revealed through his life story. He felt second best as he grew up, and now knows only temporary love shared with women who can pay for his attentions. His true love, Heavenly, has never left his heart and he is back in town to reclaim her, along with his past and his youth that he fears is slipping away. With his superficial, youth-obsessed nature, Chance must be repelled by Alexandra's fading Hollywood glory. Even so, he knows how to manipulate the actress to get what he wants by giving her what he ultimately wants for himself: a sense of being young again.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

This scene takes place at the home of Boss Finley, Heavenly's father, who is telling George Scudder that Chance first had his daughter when she was only 15 years old. Boss can't believe that Chance is back in town, and means to have him removed one way or another. He tells his son, Tom, to make sure that happens by tomorrow.

Boss finds Heavenly at the edge of the lawn and warns her against creating any more scandal that could affect his political career. She is weary of his lifestyle, including the mistress he has kept since long before her own mother died. She wishes he would have just let her marry Chance when they were younger and they would have been long gone from this town.

Boss then offers Heavenly an unlimited spending spree in town tomorrow in exchange for her dignified appearance at a political rally tonight. However, she wants no part of her father or his ambitions. She has had a hysterectomy because of a sexually transmitted disease; this experience has caused her emotional pain as well as scandalous talk in town, and she doesn't want to be held up for inspection anymore. Her father also warns her to have nothing to do with Chance, who will be dumped like garbage into the Gulf if he finds out that she has. He wants no more scandal and no more obstacles to his political ambitions. Boss then leaves to see his mistress.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

A girl named Heavenly should have had a better outcome to her life than the one she has suffered at the hand of her domineering, self-absorbed father. His denial of her love for Chance has resulted not in diminishing how she feels about her first love, but of her father himself. Even after her most recent disgrace, he still holds her up on the altar of his own ambition and sacrifices everything she has ever wanted.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

This scene takes place in the cocktail lounge of the Royal Palms hotel, where Miss Lucy is chatting with the bartender about being ushered out of the way while Boss Finley is on display at the political rally in the hotel. Her southern belle attire does not hide her world-weary soul, and alcohol seems to be her companion for the evening until Chance shows up. She has always liked him and tries to get him to leave town tonight for his own good. She knows better than most how Boss Finley feels about Chance Wayne.

Several of Chance's old friends are in the bar and he tries to impress them with the movie contract he produces from his jacket pocket as well as his arrival in town with the Princess. Heavenly's Aunt Nonnie has even shown up to try to convince him to leave town, but he is determined to take Heavenly with him.

Boss Finley, Heavenly, and Tom appear on their way into the room for the Boss' political rally. Chance and Heavenly lock eyes and stand fixed for a long minute until her father realizes what has happened and jerks her away. Chance engages in some verbal sparring with Tom, who accuses him of ruining his sister's physical and mental conditions with his sexual disease and emotional cruelty.

The Princess has come into the lounge and begs Chance to leave, to come away with her tonight and get away from all this turmoil as the noise from the rally continues in another part of the hotel.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

The St. Cloud is a showcase of old South stereotypes, down to Miss Lucy in her overly ruffled dress and the Negro waiters who shuffle silently in the background of this highly charged scene. Chance's optimism has reached a climax here, but his bravado falls flat on the stage of cynicism of people who know too much about him. No one has any more interest in his empty bragging, preferring instead their average-man stability and futures.

He is destroyed even further when Heavenly sees him and still allows herself to be trotted out in front of the rally because her father demands it. She clearly has no intentions of going against her father's will, and Chance's last hope of rescuing her is dashed.

Act 3

Act 3 Summary

The same night, the Princess is in her room at the hotel trying to make arrangements for a driver to take her away from his little town. Tom Finley and his henchmen show up at her door to make sure that she gets the help she needs in leaving and taking Chance with her. She rebuffs their strong-arm tactics, but they lurk in the hotel to make sure she will be gone soon.

Chance returns to the room and makes a phone call to a Hollywood reporter, telling her that the Princess wants to speak to her. Alexandra learns from the reporter that her movie has broken all industry records and her comeback has been a huge success, not the failure she had expected from the reactions at the premiere. Chance keeps prodding her to speak to the woman on the phone about Heavenly and himself, her new protygys. However, she is clearly distracted by what the woman is telling her on the other end.

When Alexandra hangs up, she shares her glorious news with Chance. He is less than thrilled. The phone conversation should have been a discussion of his talent and the new movie deal. The Princess is walking on air with the news of her latest success and envisions much more for the future. Now she's more ready than ever to escape this little town, and starts making plans for publicity efforts and spa visits.

Alexandra clearly has the upper hand over Chance now and dismisses him as a beach boy she picked up for pleasure, nothing more. He is a manipulator, but she is more masterful at the game. In addition, she has at least had a career to show for her agony, while he has only a string of momentary flashes and is now despised in his own hometown, where he thought he could revive his lagging career.

As the elation from the phone call fades, Alexandra and Chance sit on the edge of the bed, both aware that their usefulness is almost gone. She knows that this comeback will be short lived and he knows that he will never make it to the top. They are both past their prime: she because of her age and he because of his corrupt center.

Tom Finley has found a driver for the Princess. She asks Chance one more time to come with her, but he refuses so she leaves quietly. Tom and his three friends stand in the room and wait for Chance, who asks them not for pity but for some understanding that they all share one common enemy - time.

Act 3 Analysis

The princess gets a temporary reprieve from being banished from the limelight forever, but Chance doesn't have that much luck and stays behind to suffer his fate. His name is unfortunately ironic in that he never had much of a chance in life, given his childhood of lack. Although he has tried to create his own opportunities, they were based on shallow

precepts and never took root. Time is running out for everyone in the story, for some more quickly than others: those who realize how fleeting life is, like birds you never notice that keep flying anyway.

Characters

Bud

Bud is a St. Cloud local who used to be friendly with Chance. When Bud and friends see Chance in the hotel cocktail lounge, Bud is rather mean. Like others, he doubts much of what Chance says about himself. At the end of the play, Bud helps Tom Junior with Chance's implied castration.

Charles

Charles is a servant in the Finley household.

Alexandra del Lago

See Princess Kosmonopolis.

Heavenly Finley

Heavenly Finley is the daughter of Boss Finley and sister of Tom Junior. She is also the object of Chance Wayne's obsession. She and Chance were lovers until she contracted a sexually transmitted disease from him. Left unchecked, it led to her having a hysterectomy at a young age. Heavenly still resents the fact that her father would not let her marry Chance before he became corrupted. Despite her problems, Chance still looks at Heavenly as the symbol of his lost youth—one that he desperately wants to recapture but never does.

Tom Finley, Junior

Tom Junior is the son of Boss Finley and brother of Heavenly Finley. Like his father, he is a politician. Tom Junior does not have the power of his father, but has organized the Youth for Boss Finley club. He also acts in his father's interests in other ways. Tom Junior leads the activities to get Chance Wayne out of town. When Boss Finley gives him free reign, Tom Junior intends to castrate Chance as revenge if Chance will not leave town. At the end of the play, it seems likely this event will occur, as Chance refuses to leave.

Boss Tom J. Finley

Boss Finley is a leading political figure in St. Cloud and the father of Tom Junior and Heavenly. Finley is a harsh, domineering man, and he is incensed that Chance has

returned to town. Finley would not let Chance and Heavenly marry several years ago, which contributed to Chance's life choices and indirectly led to Heavenly's disease. Though Finley is protective of his daughter, he has also tried to marry her off to many older men. Finley enjoys having power over others.

Fly

Fly is an African-American hotel waiter who serves coffee and Bromo to Chance at the beginning of *Sweet Bird of Youth*. Chance promises him a big tip because Fly remembers Chance from happier times. In act 2, scene 2, Fly delivers a message to Chance, who only gives it a cursory glance.

Dan Hatcher

Hatcher is the assistant manager of the Royal Palms Hotel in St. Cloud, Florida, where Princess Kosmonopolis and Chance Wayne are staying and where Boss Finley's political rally is held. Hatcher is the one who informs George Scudder that Chance has checked into the hotel. Hatcher works with the Finley family to get Chance to leave the hotel and the town.

The Heckler

The Heckler is a hillbilly who attends Boss Finley's political rallies and asks questions to expose his hypocrisy. Miss Lucy facilitates his admission into the rally at the Royal Palms Hotel. He asks his question, which concerns the operation that Heavenly Finley underwent. After he asks it, he is beaten up.

Princess Kosmonopolis

Princess Kosmonopolis is the alias of middleaged actress Alexandra del Lago, a central character of the play. She is ashamed of her life as an aging starlet and embarrassed by her latest work. At the beginning of the play, the Princess does not know who Chance is or where they are.

The Princess slowly remembers that Chance is her driver/gigolo. She does not want to be left alone but knows that while Chance has been taking care of her, he wants something in return. Chance wants her to get him a studio contract; a means for getting Heavenly out of town; and material symbols of success to show off to the locals. Though the Princess gives him the first and last temporarily, this does not change Chance's destiny.

The Princess tries to help Chance get out of town, but he will not leave. Like Chance, the Princess is afraid of aging and the effects of time, but she is more realistic about her situation than Chance is about his.

Miss Lucy

Miss Lucy is the mistress of Boss Finley. She lives in the hotel in a room paid for by him. Finley's power over her is important to him. When he learns that she has said he is too old to have sex, he hurts her fingers by snapping a jewelry box on them. For this, Miss Lucy takes revenge by enabling The Heckler to get inside the rally. While she wants him to hurt Boss Finley, she is not fully comfortable with The Heckler's implied attack on Heavenly. Miss Lucy is one of the many people who tell Chance that he should not be in town, and she offers to take him to the airport.

Aunt Nonnie

Aunt Nonnie is the sister of Chance Wayne's dead mother, though she now seems to work and/or live with the Finleys. It was she who encouraged and facilitated the previous relationship between Heavenly and Chance, a fact that Boss Finley resents. Nonnie tries to get Chance to leave town. She also begs Boss Finley and Tom Junior not to resort to violence against Chance. It is Nonnie who realizes that Chance's obsessions with Heavenly and with acting are symptoms of a futile desire to return to his pure youthful state.

Scotty

Scotty is a St. Cloud local who used to be friendly with Chance. When Scotty and friends run into Chance in the hotel cocktail lounge, Scotty is rather cold. He doubts much of what Chance says about himself. At the end of the play, Scotty helps Tom Junior with Chance's implied castration.

George Scudder

George Scudder is a doctor in St. Cloud and the chief of staff at the local hospital. He performed the operation on Heavenly after her sexually transmitted disease ran rampant. Scudder also is allegedly Heavenly Finley's future husband. Though Scudder owes much to the Finley family, it is he who comes to Chance at the beginning of the play to learn his intentions and warn him of the trouble he faces. Scudder informs Chance that his mother has died and that Heavenly has had troubles since Chance last saw her. Scudder had tried previously to notify Chance about both matters, but Chance was impossible to track down. When Tom Junior wants Scudder to be part of his plans to take revenge on Chance, Scudder declines because it might jeopardize his career.

Stuff

Stuff is the bartender in the Royal Palms Hotel's cocktail lounge. He has held this job for only a short time, having previously worked as a soda jerk at a drugstore. Though Stuff

once admired Chance, he is now a member of the Youth for Boss Finley club. It is he who tells Tom Junior what Miss Lucy says about Boss Finley's inability to have sex. This gets Finley's mistress in trouble and leads to revenge by Finley.

Chance Wayne

Chance Wayne is one of the central characters in the play. He has returned to his hometown of St. Cloud to see his mother and to take his girlfriend, Heavenly, away to Hollywood. Chance has arrived under difficult circumstances. He is now twenty-nine years old, and his primary occupation is gigolo. When Chance originally left St. Cloud, it was to be an actor. While he has had some opportunities, he has been unable to capitalize on them. Chance had better luck making love to rich New York socialites, a life to which he returned after a stint in the Navy and recovery from a breakdown.

Because Chance's lifestyle made it hard to find him, he does not know that his mother has died and that Heavenly has suffered a devastating loss because of a sexually transmitted disease that he gave her on one of his previous visits. Though Chance still loves Heavenly, he is clueless about the effects his actions have had on her and on the town.

Chance has also come to St. Cloud to prove to everyone that he is a success. While Chance is obsessed with recapturing his fading youth, he also has some compassion for the Princess. At the end, Chance will not leave town despite repeated warnings that he will be harmed (castrated) if he remains.

Themes

Sex

Throughout *Sweet Bird of Youth*, the idea of sex and its consequences affects nearly every character's life. Having failed to make it as an actor, Chance's "career" consists of working as a gigolo, selling sex and/or companionship to rich, lonely, often older ladies. He met Princess Kosmonopolis while employed at a Palm Beach resort. Because of Chance's liaisons with many women, he gave his girlfriend, Heavenly Finley, a venereal disease the last time they were together. The innocent Heavenly unknowingly let the disease progress unchecked and eventually had to have a hysterectomy. Sex robbed her of her youth and her ability to have children. Because of this incident, everyone wants Chance to leave town, either for his own safety or to punish him. He does not leave, and it is implied at the end of the play that he will be castrated.

For some characters, sex is related to power and money. Princess Kosmonopolis forces Chance to have sex with her at the end of act 1, scene 1. Because she is in a fog about him during the scene, he tries to take advantage of the situation, demanding that she sign some traveler's checks for him. She only does this after the act is consummated. Along similar lines, Boss Finley keeps a mistress, Miss Lucy, at the hotel. When he learns that she has claimed he is too old to have sex, he takes his revenge. He brings her a diamond clip in a jewelry box, but snaps it closed on her fingers, injuring her, when she opens it. He then leaves her, taking the gift with him. The theme of sex drives much of the action of the play, directly or indirectly.

Time, Youth, and Aging

Many characters in *Sweet Bird of Youth* are obsessed with aging and the ravages of time. Though Chance is twenty-nine years old with thinning hair, he is still handsome enough to attract women like the Princess. Yet the only woman Chance truly wants is Heavenly, who shared a romance with him beginning when she was fifteen years old. Several characters point out to him that she has changed. Because of the sexually transmitted disease Chance gave her, she has had a hysterectomy. Heavenly tells her father at one point, "Scudder's knife cut the youth out of my body, made me an old childless woman. Dry, cold, empty, like an old woman."

But Chance believes that if he can take Heavenly away, nothing will have changed; they will move to Hollywood, and Chance will finally be successful as an actor. Heavenly is a symbol of his youth and his promise that he has lost along the way. When Chance and Heavenly meet face to face, they can say nothing to each other. Still Chance cannot give up on his last vestige of hope and submits to what is implied to be castration at the end of the play.

Princess Kosmonopolis shares Chance's fear of aging. She is really Alexandra del Lago, a middleaged movie actress who knows that Hollywood favors the young. She does not want to retire, but ran out of the premiere of her latest movie when she saw herself on screen. The Princess is hiding out from her identity, drinking and smoking hashish in hopes of dulling the pain. Chance is a sympathetic distraction, though she is under no illusions about his intentions.

At the end of the play, when Chance tries one last time to get her to help him and Heavenly escape by telling a Hollywood gossip columnist about them as actors, the Princess learns that all is not lost. Her movie is a hit and she is praised as having made a comeback. She never mentions Chance and Heavenly. Though the Princess realizes that her victory over time is only temporary, and that eventually she will be tossed aside by Hollywood because of her age, she relishes her short-term victory. Aging and time are parts of life that cannot be avoided, but only Chance cannot accept that by the end of the play.

Politics and Hypocrisy

While many characters have their hypocritical moments and attitudes, Boss Finley is the biggest example of hypocrisy in the play. Much of this hypocrisy is linked to political ambitions, though some of it is personal as well. An upcoming political election is an important part of the play. Finley is having a televised rally to address voters about the recent brutal castration of an innocent African American. Those who castrated the man wanted to make sure it was known that white women would be protected in Florida. While Boss Finley wants to keep white blood "pure," he condemns the crime in his speech and calls himself a friend to men both black and white.

When The Heckler asks a question related to Boss's hypocrisy, he is beaten. He is the only character who directly challenges the Boss. Chance only does so indirectly. Because Chance will not leave town, he, too, is castrated, with the implicit consent of Boss Finley. Heavenly points out another hypocrisy of her father's. While he married her mother for love, he will not allow his daughter the same privilege. He uses her, and others, to show how powerful he is, though this power is invariably linked to politics and/or hypocrisy.

Style

Setting

Setting *Sweet Bird of Youth* is a drama set at the time the play was written in the late 1950s. All the action takes place in two settings over the course of one day, an Easter Sunday, in the Gulf Coast city of St. Cloud, Florida. A majority of the action occurs in the Royal Palms Hotel. All of acts 1 and 3 take place in one room in the hotel. The Princess and Chance Wayne occupy this room. Act 2, scene 2 occurs in the cocktail lounge and palm garden of the hotel. The other setting is the home of Boss Finley, specifically the terrace. These settings emphasize a specific time and place—the South during the 1950s, when racial and class tensions were still high. Chance has chosen to return to St. Cloud to reclaim his girlfriend Heavenly and his youth. Yet much of the play takes place in a hotel where he is really not welcome, not where Chance lived as a youth or other places where he might have more fond memories of the past (though he did work in the hotel at one time). This impersonal setting underscores the kind of life Chance now leads and its problems. A hotel is also a central place where the community meets, creating opportunities for Chance to run into people that he used to know.

Special Effects and Images

Throughout *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Williams calls for a cyclorama (a large wall placed at the back of a room or stage) on which to project images onto the stage behind the action. The images are not supposed to be realistic, but are intended to help set the mood of the play and underscore the setting. For most of the play, the image is a grove of palm trees blowing in the wind. The wind goes from soft to loud, depending on the action of the scene. When the wind is loud, it blends with the musical score in a specific sound/song called "The Lament." This is used in act 1, scene 1, for example, when the Princess' memory finally returns and she first mentions that she is in hiding after what she believes has been a disastrous career move. Other images include a daytime image of the calm sea and sky, and a nighttime scene of a palm garden with branches and stars.

A significant use of the cyclorama occurs in act 2, scene 2, during Boss Finley's speech. An effect is created so that Miss Lucy, Chance, Stuff, and others are watching the televised rally in the hotel bar while it is occurring on the same stage. Because the rally takes place in another part of the hotel, Boss Finley, Heavenly, Tom Junior, and the Heckler, among others, walk by the bar and off stage into the ballroom. Those in the bar view the rally by "turning on" the television, which is actually a projection of a big television screen against a fourth wall on the set.

The volume of the television is very loud at first, making it seem as if Boss Finley is yelling. Stuff, a Finley supporter, is happy with the volume. Miss Lucy complains about the noise and turns the sound down, only to have Stuff turn it up again. When Stuff turns

it up, Boss Finley is saying that he does not condone the castration of the innocent black man. Moments later, the Heckler appears on screen. Projecting the television in this matter emphasizes the kind of power Boss Finley thinks he has. He believes he is bigger and louder than anyone else. Because of their tense relationship with Boss, both Miss Lucy and Chance want to turn him down, hearing his message but limiting his impact.

Symbolism

Sweet Bird of Youth is replete with symbolism. All the action takes place on Easter Sunday. The use of this symbolic day of rebirth has been interpreted in several different ways. Boss Finley claims he has been reborn during the rally. On Good Friday, his effigy was burned at a local university, yet he is still alive and in charge on Sunday, preaching on television. By his side is his daughter, Heavenly, who has just been publicly humiliated by the Heckler. The Heckler is severely beaten. But Boss Finley rises above it all. Some critics believe that Chance Wayne has undergone a compacted reversal of the Easter cycle, beginning with Chance's resurrection in the morning and castration (crucifixion) at night.

Another use of symbolism in the play is found in some of the characters' names. Chance Wayne's chances in life are indeed on the wane. Heavenly Finley's first name brings up a number of contradictions. She may still be beautiful, and heavenly to Chance and her father, but she is dead on the inside because her love has been denied and she has had her childbearing abilities taken away at an early age. Though Princess Kosmonopolis is only the alias of the actress Alexandra del Lago, she acts like royalty. She does not accept being condescended to and is always in charge. Kosmonopolis suggests Greek words that mean worldly and city. She is above the petty world of St. Cloud, merely using it for cover as she hides from her real world. These kinds of symbols enrich the text and add some definition to the characters.

Historical Context

In 1959, the United States was on the verge of major transitions, primarily on the home front, though the ever-escalating Cold War between America and the U.S.S.R. was also a constant threat. The country was expanding. Two new states were admitted in 1959: Alaska and Hawaii. Republican President Dwight D. Eisenhower was near the end of his second term. In 1960, Democrat John F. Kennedy would be elected to the presidency, defeating Eisenhower's vice president, Richard M. Nixon.

Many observers believed that Nixon lost at least partly because of his image and attitudes expressed during televised debates with Kennedy. In the 1950s, politicians were televised for the first time. Senator Joseph McCarthy's anti-Communist hearings were televised. Conventions were aired for the first time in 1952. In 1959, the Federal Communications Commission upheld an equal time rule for political candidates. The power of television was soon realized, then exploited, by politicians.

Eisenhower's United States was relatively economically strong in 1959. The country was recovering from a recession in 1957-1958, but generally sound. His government spending bill was scaled down, putting fiscal responsibility before both military and domestic concerns. Credit cards had only recently been introduced; they would have a great effect on the American economy in the coming decades. American Express issued its first credit cards in 1958.

One big issue in the late 1950s was civil rights. The civil rights movement that exploded in the 1960s was based in part on events of the 1950s. In 1954, the Supreme Court handed down a landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. This case focused on education, addressing the legality of separate schools for whites and blacks. The court ruled that separate was not equal, and that most schools for blacks were far inferior to those attended primarily by whites. Court-ordered desegregation of schools became a public tug-of-war. The actual process of integration was very slow, and many southern states, especially Virginia, fought integration, even as late as 1959 and beyond. True integration was not completed until the 1960s.

In 1959, Eisenhower tried to convince Congress to enact a seven-point civil rights program in a special session. Despite such measures, states like Tennessee continued to hold white primaries in which blacks could not vote. Racism was still rampant in the South. In 1956, Emmett Till was murdered for allegedly whistling at and/or assaulting a white woman. His killers were acquitted, though they were obviously, and later admittedly, guilty. Events like the castration of an innocent African American mentioned in *Sweet Bird of Youth* were not unheard of.

Despite such crimes, moral standards were changing in the United States. In 1959, the Supreme Court ruled that the postmaster general could not decide what was too obscene to be sent through the mail. The case concerned a book by D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterly's Lover*. While single men were seen as swinging bachelors, women were supposed to be desirable, but untouchable until marriage. Yet the Kinsey Report

on sexual activities of Americans in the early 1950s showed that Americans regularly had extramarital sex and that homosexuality was common. Depictions and discussions of sex became more common in movies, novels, and music. Though the government had organized public health officials to diagnose and treat venereal diseases in the post-World War II period, there was a slight rise in rates of syphilis and gonorrhea at the end of the 1950s as complacency set in.

Women's roles were also changing in this time period. More women were working outside of the home, but most were limited to jobs in the service industry or to clerical and assembly line positions. Fewer women attended college than in the 1940s. Only about thirty-five percent of college students were women at the end of the decade, and thirty-seven percent of those left before graduation, most to get married. Career options were limited. There was only one woman in the United States Senate in 1959, Margaret Chase Smith. In the 1960s, women's roles would change and career options would start to expand. By the 1970s, there would be a burgeoning feminist movement. Big changes in American life were on the horizon in 1959.

Critical Overview

When *Sweet Bird of Youth* made its debut in 1959, it received a mixed reception. While some critics thought it was another example of Williams's genius, others saw it as lesser Williams. Both sides, however, generally agreed that Williams's command of language had not diminished, and the play was a box office success. Over time, *Sweet Bird of Youth* came to be regarded as an example of Williams on the decline.

Walter Kerr of *New York Herald Tribune* was one critic who praised the play, though like most critics he had some problems with it. He wrote, "There isn't a moment during *Sweet Bird of Youth* that it isn't seething to explode in the theater's face. Mr. Williams's newest play is a succession of fuses, deliberately—and for the most part magnificently—lighted."

Several critics who liked *Sweet Bird of Youth*, and even some who did not, believed that Act 2 did not fit well within the play's structure. For example, Richard Watts, Jr., of the *New York Post* praised the power of Williams's writing but added, "What worried me were a number of loose ends, the lack of complete fulfillment of several characters, and the hinting at themes that were not developed."

Among those critics who praised the play, some were disturbed by the play's content and themes, which were rather shocking for their day. Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* wrote, "It is a play that ranges wide through the lower depths, touching on political violence as well as diseases of mind and body. But it has the spontaneity of an improvisation." John Chapman of the *Daily News* wrote, "I don't see how it can be liked, in the sense that one might like the simple joys of *The Music Man*, but it cannot be ignored. . . ." He added, "Seeing . . . *Sweet Bird of Youth* . . . is something like finding oneself, unexpectedly and without premeditation, in a place one wouldn't be caught dead in."

Other critics were more distressed by the content of *Sweet Bird of Youth*. Marya Mannes of *The Reporter* wrote

The laughter at the Martin Beck Theatre in New York these nights is made, I think, of . . . a fascination with and amusement in depravity, sickness, and degradation which makes me equally disturbed at the public, the playwright, and those critics who have hailed *Sweet Bird of Youth* as one of Tennessee Williams's 'finest dramas' and 'a play of overwhelming force.'

Along similar lines, Kenneth Tynan of the *New Yorker* argued

For my part, I recognized nothing but a special, rarefied situation that had been carried to extremes of cruelty with a total disregard for probability, human relevance, and the laws of dramatic structure. My brain was buzzing with questions. . . . I suspect that *Sweet Bird of Youth* will be of more interest to Mr. Williams's biographers than to lovers of the theatre.

Other critics also dismissed the play as only interesting to those who are fans of Williams. Robert Brustein of *Encounter* argued

the play is interesting primarily if you are interested in its author. As dramatic art, it is disturbingly bad— aimless, dishonest, and crudely melodramatic—in a way that Williams's writing has not been bad since his early play, *Battle of Angels*. But if the latter failed because its author did not sufficiently understand his characters, *Sweet Bird of Youth* suffers both from his ignorance of, and obsession with, himself.

Harold Clurman of *The Nation* concurred. He wrote, "Its place in the author's development and its fascination for the audience strike me as more significant than its value as drama."

Several other critics disliked the play because of dramatic failings. Brustein, writing this time in *Hudson Review*, judged

Williams seems less concerned with dramatic verisimilitude than with communicating some hazy notions about such disparate items as Sex, Youth, Time, Corruption, Purity, Castration, Politics, and The South. As a result, the action of the play is patently untrue, the language is flat and circumlocutory, the form disjointed and rambling, and the characters—possessing little coherence of their own—function only as a thin dressing for these bare thematic bones.

In short, Henry Hewes of *Saturday Review* concluded, "the total play . . . adds up to a good deal less than the sum of its parts."

Sweet Bird of Youth was revived several times over the years, and the critics remained divided, with most having serious problems with the play. Of a 1975 revival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Gina Mallet of *Time* wrote

Age has not refined Sweet Bird's effulgent bathos. The reduction of personality to sex organs is the dynamic of skin flicks and soap operas. . . . Today it seems fatally misconceived, a sentimental melodrama instead of a savage, black comedy on southern mores.

A few critics were still impressed by Williams's creation, including Howard Kissel of *Women's Wear Daily*. He wrote

In its time, *Sweet Bird of Youth* was a powerful emotional experience; now it impresses one mainly because of the deliciousness of the language. The characters may not be as tragic as they once seemed, but they still have credibility as American archetypes.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Petrusso is a freelance writer and editor living in Austin, Texas. In this essay, Petrusso argues that the character of Chance Wayne is focused on one thing—denying the reality of his life—and analyzes his futile quest.

Reviewing the original Broadway production of Tennessee Williams's *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Frank Aston of *New York World-Telegram and The Sun* pointed out, "He [Chance Wayne] is racing toward something he can never gain, while she [Princess Kosmonopolis] is fleeing the ruins of something she never had." Implicit in Aston's observation is that both of these characters—the primary ones in the play—are living in denial of their current realities. *Sweet Bird of Youth* explores the desperation and panic of Chance Wayne. This essay looks at Chance, his reality, how he handles it, and its evolution to a tragic end.

Chance Wayne is a twenty-nine-year-old man who cannot accept what his life has become. He has come home to St. Cloud, Florida, to try to make himself and everyone else believe that his life is what it is not. When Chance was a young man growing up, he was popular and good-looking. He attracted numerous women and was friends with the sons of community leaders. Instead of going to college, Chance left home to pursue a career as an actor. He had numerous chances to make a success of it, but felt blocked by something. He only got as far as the chorus of a Broadway production of *Oklahoma*. He learned a profitable way of life along the way: Chance began sleeping with rich women as a means of supporting himself. Over time, this has become his career. Indeed, the only reason he is in St. Cloud is because he is with an aging actress, Alexandra del Lago (a. k. a. The Princess Kosmonopolis). He met her when he was working as a gigolo in Palm Beach, Florida.

It is Chance's secondary career that has created problems in his life. For many years he has been in love with Heavenly Finley, the daughter of local political bigwig Boss Tom Finley. Chance and Heavenly began a sexual relationship when she was 15 years old. They would have married if Boss Finley had not intervened and refused to allow it. Despite Boss Finley's directive, Chance and Heavenly have seen each other periodically when Chance has visited St. Cloud. One of the last times Chance was there, Heavenly contracted an unnamed venereal disease from him. He got it from one of the rich women with whom he was having a sexual relationship. Because of Heavenly's naiveté about what was wrong with her, the disease ran out of control and she was forced to have a hysterectomy at a very young age.

At the beginning of *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Chance is unaware of the harm he has caused Heavenly, or even that his own mother has died. Because Chance's "work" requires him to move often, no one was able to find him to tell him what has happened. This situation is telling. While Chance claims to still love Heavenly and is saddened by his mother's death when he learns of it, he apparently has made no effort to get in touch with them, even through an intermediary. This implies that Chance believes nothing has changed in St. Cloud. He has idealized his hometown to a great degree. The town once praised him

for his small acting triumphs. While some things have changed, Boss Finley's intense disliking for Chance has not.

Because Chance believes that no one in St. Cloud knows that he has failed to have a solid acting career, he tries to use this ignorance to build himself up in their eyes as well as his own. Though the Princess purchased his clothes, the wad of money he flashes in act 2 is hers, and the Cadillac he drives is hers, Chance thinks he can fool everyone in St. Cloud into believing that he is a successful actor. Chance denies the reality of his situation over and over again. As the play progresses, these fantasies about his life grow deeper, and he grows more out of touch.

In act 1, it is revealed that Chance has tricked the Princess into giving him a movie contract at a studio she owns a stake in. Though the Princess tells him the contract is full of loopholes, Chance conveniently forgets such statements. In the same act, Chance also tries to force her to pretend to host a talent contest for two young future stars. The outcome would be rigged, of course, so that Chance and Heavenly would win and be able to leave for Hollywood together. These kinds of fantasies reveal much about Chance and his desperation. If nothing else, he is extremely self-absorbed and self-centered. He has not asked Heavenly if she wants to go with him, but assumes she does, even after Dr. Scudder has told Chance that Scudder will be marrying her the following month. It also shows that he believes he can control the Princess in her depressed state. He is wrong on both counts.

By act 2, scene 2, which takes place in the hotel lounge, Chance has grown more desperate. He laid out his plans in act 1, and is now acting on them, but this scene shows just how out of touch with reality Chance is. He acts as if he is still the most popular man in town. He shows Aunt Nonnie, Miss Lucy, and just about everyone who will look his contract with Princess's studio. When Chance describes the contest to Aunt Nonnie, he describes it as a beauty contest just for Heavenly so that she can win and then leave with him. Chance changes his stories as needed.

Also in this scene, Chance has the piano player play "his song," but none of the former friends who have come in will sing with him. Chance denies that he has worked as a beach boy in Palm Beach, but makes up a movie called *Youth* that he will allegedly be starring in. This is to impress two men in his old group as well as Boss Finley's mistress, Miss Lucy. They know the truth, however. Scotty, one of the men, reveals that he knows the Cadillac is not Chance's. When the Princess comes down to the lounge to find him, she also knows the truth about him, though he cannot accept it yet. She tells him, "Chance, when I saw you driving under the window with your head held high, with that terrible stiff-necked pride of the defeated which I know so well; I knew that your come-back had been a failure like mine."

Despite such insights, Chance clings to his vain hopes, even after he comes face to face with Heavenly in the hotel lounge. Though Chance is doing all of this for Heavenly—or, more correctly, for his idealization of her—when he is looking her in the eye, he cannot say anything. He allows her to be taken off by her father and brother after a few moments. Chance never fights directly for what he wants. He knows by this point that

he cannot have Heavenly and cannot be what he wants to be. Still, he denies the truth of the situation. As Chance watches Heavenly on television next to her father as he gives his speech, Chance tells Miss Lucy, "Tonight, God help me, somehow, I don't know how, but somehow I'll take her out of St. Cloud. I'll wake up in her arms, and I'll give her life back to her."

Chance has not given up at the beginning of act 3. He again tries to force the Princess into helping him. Though the Princess is prepared to continue to use him as her employee, he will not let go of the idealized life he wants. Chance calls Sally Powers, a famous Hollywood gossip columnist, and forces the Princess to talk to her. His idea is that the Princess will tell Powers about him and Heavenly, two future movie stars. The plan backfires when Powers informs the Princess that her latest movie is anything but the disaster the actress thought it was. She is back on top, at least temporarily. The Princess never mentions Chance and Heavenly. The flaws of Chance's desperate plan are obvious. Even if the Princess had gotten Powers to mention them as future stars, how would the situation have changed? Chance is grasping at straws that do not really exist.

Chance is told numerous times to leave town and is given several opportunities to do so. He refuses to leave with either Miss Lucy or the Princess in act 2, scene 2, and they are just two of several characters that warn him. But Chance cannot do it. This wanna-be actor is performing the role of his life. He cannot let go of the idea that Heavenly is his, and that he is more than a gigolo. He has set himself up in a losing situation, which he realizes by the end. He says in the last pages of the play, "Something's got to mean something, don't it, Princess? I mean like your life means nothing, except that you never could make it, always almost, never quite?" Chance has never outgrown St. Cloud and the role he played there. The world may have been Chance's stage, but the folks back at home in St. Cloud were the only audience he cared about. When that is gone, there is nothing left for Chance.

Source: Annette Petrusso, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

In the following review, Griffin examines Sweet Bird of Youth as a 'forceful' and 'compassionate' drama that highlights Williams' theme of 'time as the enemy.'

Sweet Bird of Youth is Williams's most eloquent expression of his recurrent theme that time is "the enemy." In the face of time's relentless advance, transient youth takes flight, deserting those who trusted it. In one of the finest examples of Williams's plastic theater the theme pervades not only the characterization but also the words and action, as well as the setting and sound. It is a forceful and compassionate drama of one decisive day in the lives of a man and a woman played out against a background of sleazy politics and impending violence in a small Southern town.

The female lead is a Hollywood star who reluctantly retired when her youth and beauty faded. While traveling incognito, she changes her name from Alexandra Del Lago to Princess Kosmonopolis, from Williams's recurring symbolic rural lake to the city and Cinderella's ultimate title. Her twenty-nine-year-old male escort is to suffer shock after shock as he comes to realize that appearance and youth, on which he has staked his life so far, must inevitably go down to defeat by "the enemy, time." Gambling on his good looks, he expected to achieve fame and fortune in the movies and so far has gone from bit parts to beach boy, encouraged by what Williams sees as "the Cinderella story . . . our favorite national myth, the cornerstone of the film industry, if not of the Democracy itself." Appropriately, his name is Chance.

The play, like others by Williams, takes the form of a visit. The action begins with the couple's arrival on Easter Day, implying hope. But by the end only despair is left for Chance. As the play opens, they have checked in at "a fashionable hotel somewhere along the Gulf Coast, in a town called in St. Cloud," Chance's hometown, where in high school he was a "star."

Act 1 takes place in their hotel suite, where literally and figuratively circling each other, Chance and the Princess reveal the immediate and distant past, which brought them to the present instant. She is traveling in style, fleeing from failure. So shocked was she at her appearance in close-up at her comeback film's premiere that she ran up the aisle and out of the theater, in "interminable retreat from the city of flames." She seeks refuge in drink, drugs, and sex. Chance has made this detour on his trip with the Princess to show off in his hometown the expensive clothes, the Cadillac, and the acting contract the Princess has signed with him during their journey, "notarized and witnessed by three strangers found in a bar." Besides Hollywood stardom Chance has another impossible dream, to marry his hometown sweetheart, Heavenly, his "one true love," whose father has other ideas for her future.

In some ways the Princess represents Chance's dream of fame, although even he can see that she is far from happy, but she has one thing Chance lacks—talent. Chance brags that he had won an acting contest; the truth is that he received only honorable mention. Yet his illusions of stardom may be realized by means of the contract, which he

will attempt to enforce by blackmailing the Princess after he has secretly tape-recorded her using drugs. But age and experience will be on her side. She is a survivor. Chance, who has only his youth and good looks, is destined to be a victim of time.

As the Princess lies asleep, a mask over her eyes blotting out the reality she cannot face, the first caller at their suite is young Doctor Scudder. He warns Chance to leave town; as a "criminal degenerate," he is threatened with castration for infecting "a certain girl," who is now engaged to the doctor. Although Chance and Heavenly have been lovers since high school, her father will allow her to marry only if the man is wealthy. This has led to Chance's pursuit of easy money as a gigolo to rich women, but he has gained nothing but a venereal disease. Unknowingly, he has transmitted it to Heavenly. The events of the day and the relationship with the Princess destroy Chance's dreams and teach him the bitter lesson that his youth will desert him as he reaches the noon of his life.

The Princess and Chance are among Williams's best character creations. She recognizes that she is a "monster," but she has confidence in her talent. She also is realistic about the ravages of time, recognizing the transience of her comeback (which she is to learn later has been successful). She is imperious, tough, self-indulgent, vulnerable, and alone. She tries to reach out when she feels some stirring in her heart for Chance, and there is the hope of caring companionship, if not love, between them. But when he rejects her she realizes that she is, and always will be, a loner. She knows she has to make it alone; she is not dependent on "the kindness of strangers." (Although one commentator classifies her with "women who have known happiness but who have lost their mates and who try to overcome the loss," there seems to be little justification for this in the text.)

The Princess is aware, as Williams points out in his stage directions, that "the clock is equally relentless to them both." Her long aria in act 1 explains that she retired from films because her looks were fading and her youth was gone, but she was still "unsatisfied and raging":

PRINCESS: . . . If I had just been old but you see, I wasn't old. . . .

I just wasn't young, not young, young.

I just wasn't young anymore. . . .

CHANCE: Nobody's young anymore. . . . (all Williams's ellipses)

The play's change of setting and shift of emphasis between acts 1 and 2 had its critics and its defenders. As Walter Kerr wryly observes, "*Sweet Bird of Youth* was. . . . quickly p op ular, and quickly attacked. Many things were said: that the political second act was the *real* play and should have been developed, that the personal story of the first and third acts constituted the *real* play and that the second should have been omitted." While Benjamin Nelson criticizes the play's "blatant lack of unity" and claims that "act one has almost nothing to do with act two," careful observation indicates that act 2

dramatizes conflicts established in act 1, namely between Chance and Boss Finley, Chance and the peers he left behind, and Chance and the Princess.

The act is a merciless mirror of small-town prejudice and its antagonism, rooted in envy, toward Chance. Scene 1 takes place on Boss Finley's plantation, always inaccessible to Chance because he was born on the wrong side of the tracks, and scene 2 is set in the hotel cocktail lounge where Chance's former pals, now his enemies, congregate. Not that Chance's condescending attitude endears him to these men. A reminder of his high school dreams of Hollywood stardom is his confiding to the bartender, whose job Chance formerly held, that he designed the uniform, based on a costume Victor Mature wore in a foreign legion film, and, he says, "I looked better in it than he did."

In scene 2 Williams creates in the cocktail lounge, almost entirely through offstage effects, all the hoopla and hype of a political rally. Car sirens, band music, headlights, and flashbulbs herald Boss Finley's arrival with Tom Junior and Heavenly, as they march through on their way to the platform in the ballroom, where Boss will deliver on "all-South-wide TV" his "Voice of God" speech. (A Cinderella figure himself, Boss rose from obscurity to prominence when, he claims, God spoke to him.) He says God told him to take violent action against "all of them that want to adulterate the pure white blood of the South." At the bar Miss Lucy, Boss's mistress, whom he has treated cruelly, protects the Heckler from discovery. When she comments that Boss "honestly believes" God has spoken to him, the Heckler counters: "I believe that the silence of God, the absolute speechlessness of Him is a long, long and awful thing that the whole world is lost because of. I think it's yet to be broken to any man, living or any yet lived on earth, —no exceptions, and least of all Boss Finley."

Then the back wall of the set becomes a huge television screen, with Boss's head filling the screen as he warns of the threat of "blood pollution" from the black race. In counterpoint to the speech Miss Lucy is warning Chance to leave: as punishment for infecting Heavenly, he has been threatened with the same fate as that suffered by a black man apprehended at random—castration.

On the TV screen the camera swings to the Heckler interrupting Boss Finley with a question about Heavenly's operation, then we see Boss trying to quell the outbreak of disturbance, and then, offscreen, the Heckler comes tumbling down the lounge stairs, beaten by Finley's henchmen. In eight minutes of sheer theatricality Williams has left no doubt of the threat to the state and the threat to Chance by the sanctimonious preacher of hate. Although Williams states "social consciousness . . . has marked most of my writing," and the truth of his remark can be seen in the wider implications of his works, this is the only specific intrusion of politics in the major plays. It dramatizes the dangers inherent in the Boss Finleys who claim God has spoken to them and directs their actions. This climactic scene closes act 2 with political conflict, while act 3 brings to a head the personal conflict between Chance and the Princess.

Williams's seventh sense of theatrical instinct is no-where so evident as in his reaching a note of high drama as the end approaches. He creates a magic that is so memorable it is forever associated with this play. Chance phones an influential gossip columnist to

have the Princess announce him as a "discovery" to star with Heavenly in a new film called *Youth*. Instead, the Princess learns that her movie is not a flop but a hit, "the greatest comeback in the history of the industry." Her transformation from fugitive back into movie queen, in the course of a brief telephone conversation, is pure theater and pure Williams—humorous, lyric, compassionate, and true. It concludes:

CHANCE: Here, get her back on this phone. . . . Talk about me and talk about Heavenly to her.

PRINCESS: Talk about a beach-boy I picked up for pleasure, distraction from panic? Now? When the nightmare is over? . . . You've just been using me. . . . When I needed you downstairs you shouted, 'Get her a wheel chair!' Well, I didn't need a wheel chair, I came up alone, as always. . . . Chance, you've gone past something you couldn't afford to go past; your time, your youth, you've passed it. It's all you had, and you've had it.

Chance reacts furiously, forcing her to look at herself in the mirror, to see that her youth and beauty have gone. Instead, she says she sees "Alexandra Del Lago, artist and star!" The difference between her and Chance, she tells him, is that "out of the passion and torment of my existence I have created a thing that I can unveil, a sculpture, almost heroic, that I can unveil, which is true."

But Chance can only wonder why he never got the chance to make it: "Something's got to mean something, don't it, Princess? I mean like your life means nothing, except that you never could make it, always almost, never quite?"

Chance in some ways resembles Val in *Orpheus Descending*. Both are young men who have chosen the easy path of "corruption" in life but who, at the ages of twenty-nine and thirty, feel the pressure of time. Both have a true love for a woman but are defeated by outside forces—the small town and its denizens who gang up on Val for a mistaken breach of conduct and, in Sweet Bird, the political force of Boss Finley, which punishes Chance for a personal reason, being a "criminal degenerate" whose venereal disease, transmitted to Heavenly, has resulted in her hysterectomy. The Heckler, of course, believes the operation to have been an abortion, illegal at that time. Chance is the more complex and human of the two, for, while both young men have fallen prey to corruption, Chance's own misguided ideals bring about his downfall. Unlike a true tragic hero, he never attains a significant recognition—that the fame and fortune he seeks are not inevitably the reward of good looks (especially as Hollywood demonstrates otherwise). The personal truth he does realize at the end, that his youth and attractiveness are fleeting, makes him a pathetic rather than a tragic figure.

Finley's forces are even more deadly than the towns-people in *Orpheus Descending*, for Finley stirs up state-wide racial hatred. Because of his political prominence and ambitions, Boss, who never could accept Chance as a son-in-law, is as ruthless in his family relations as in his political aims. Chance's former schoolmates, whose clothes and jobs he derides, form a chorus of men who join forces against him with the sinister Youth for Finley, a kind of junior Ku Klux Klan. They also demonstrate another facet of youth, its group violence. Their brutality is first seen against the Heckler, who is

"systematically beaten." Even though the final moments are quiet, their menacing members surround Chance at the end, and we assume he will be castrated, the fate with which he has been threatened.

Williams in his Sunday *New York Times* article of 8 March 1959 (often used as the play's "Foreword"), prior to the opening of *Sweet Bird of Youth*, answers the charge that his plays are violent: "I write about violence in American life only because I am not so well acquainted with the society of other countries. . . . If there is any truth in the Aristotelian idea that violence is purged by its poetic representation on a stage, then it may be that my cycle of violent plays have had a moral justification after all."

In *Sweet Bird of Youth* Williams perfectly achieves his ideal of plastic theater, in which characterization, action, language, setting, and sound create an artistic unity expressing the theme. As always, the dialogue characterizes the speakers. In Williams's large cast of memorable women the Princess has her unique idiom—tough, resilient, decisive, knowing. In act 1, scene 1, she sizes up Chance after he tries to blackmail her: "I hate to think of what kind of desperation has made you try to intimidate me, ME?. . . . You were well born, weren't you? . . . with just one disadvantage, a laurel wreath on your forehead, given too early, without enough effort to earn it." Then she sets forth her terms of employment for Chance in a passage that reminds us that time is even more of an enemy to her, being older than Chance:

Forget the legend that I was and the ruin of that legend. . . . No mention of death, never, never a word on that odious subject. I've been accused of having a death wish but I think it's life that I wish for, terribly, shamelessly, on any terms whatsoever. When I say now, the answer must not be later. I have only one way to forget these things I don't want to remember and that's through the act of love-making.

She can be lyric as well. In act 2, scene 2, after Tom Junior has threatened Chance, she hears a strain of thematic music, which Williams calls "The Lament." She describes time's loss in a passage that creates its own music through assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia, repetition, and rhythm:

All day I've kept hearing a sort of lament that drifts through the air of this place. It says, 'Lost, lost, never to be found again.' Palm gardens by the sea and olive groves on Mediterranean islands all have that lament drifting through them. 'Lost, lost.'. . . [Williams's ellipsis] The isle of Cyprus, Monte Carlo, San Remo, Torremolenas, Tangiers. They're all places of exile from whatever we loved. . . . Chance, believe me, after failure comes flight. . . . Face it. Call the car.

Unlike Chance, however, she at least has the assurance of her talent as she faces her faded looks in the mirror. Although she is clear-eyed about time, the defeater, she will still go on; as she says monosyllabically to Chance at the end, "Chance, we've got to go on." This motif of going on despite obstacles will be repeated by Hannah, almost verbatim, in *The Night of the Iguana.*

Chance's idiom is less distinctive, but Williams's artistry heightens what could be the banalities of the less educated. Almost entirely monosyllabic, his speeches are nevertheless sharp, so that the give-and-take with the Princess, which occupies the entire first act, reveals the characters of both. When in scene 1 the Princess asks if he has any acting talent, Chance replies: "I'm not as positive of it as I once was. I've had more chances than I could count on my fingers, and made the grade almost, but not quite, every time. Something always blocks me."

Because Chance and the Princess are on the stage so much of the time, and the portraits of them are so detailed, the other characters are less well developed. Heavenly has very little to say; she is acted upon instead of active, a direct contrast to the Princess. Nonnie, Heavenly's ineffectual but kindly maiden aunt, who is sympathetic to Chance, resembles her counterpart in Williams's film *Baby Doll* and his one-act play *The Unsatisfactory Supper.*

Like Jabe in *Orpheus Descending*., Boss Finley is one of Williams's few characters without redeeming qualities, unless it be his (misguided) love for his daughter. In his one encounter alone with Heavenly, in scene 1 of act 2, there is, "in her father," Williams points out, "a sudden dignity": "It's important not to think of his attitude toward her in the terms of crudely conscious incestuous feeling, but just in the natural terms of almost any aging father's feeling for a beautiful young daughter who reminds him of a dead wife that he desired intensely when she was the age of his daughter." Boss's idiom resembles Big Daddy's, in that it is gruff, colorful, and proudly uneducated. In addition, because Boss is not sympathetic, his speeches reflect his sense of power; he is used to giving orders and seeing them obeyed.

When Heavenly suggests that he has "an illusion of power," he replies, "I have power, which is not an illusion." She informs him that, if she is accepted, she is "going into a convent." Boss shouts: "You ain't going into no convent. This state is a Protestant region and a daughter in a convent would politically ruin me."

With great economy but deadly aim and sure theatricalism Williams portrays in Boss Finley the danger of a corrupt, power-hungry politician who will destroy anything that stands in his way and anyone who threatens his public image. The symbol of this image and the danger it implies is the stunning stage effect in scene 2 of act 2, in which the entire back wall of the stage becomes an enormous TV screen, on which appears "the image of Boss Finley."

George Brandt believes Williams's cinematic style is illustrated by this scene, which is an attempt "to turn the playhouse into a picture theater." But it should be remembered that Williams had studied theater at the New School with Erwin Piscator, a proponent of the use of back-projected film to achieve stage effects. Piscator's wife, Maria Ley-Piscator, presents a strong argument for Williams's use of the latter technique.

The epigraph for the play is by Hart Crane, whose work Williams greatly admired: "Relentless caper for all those who step / The legend of their youth into the noon."

It is a warning to "all those" whose hopes depend on the legend of their youth that it will not survive the bright light of the sun when they reach the noon of life. Entitled "Legend," Crane's poem begins: "As silent as a mirror is believed / Realities plunge in silence by."

Constant reminders of the passing of time and of youth are Williams's symbols of the clock and the mirror. At the climax of the play, in act 3, Chance forces the Princess to confront in the mirror the reality of her aging face, a sight she confesses was so terrifying to her when it filled the screen at the preview of her comeback film that she fled: "The screen's a very clear mirror. There's a thing called a close-up. . . . Your head, your face, is caught in the frame of the picture with a light blazing on it and all your terrible history screams while you smile". But she is not defeated, for she tells Chance that in the mirror she sees herself as "artist and star," while his mirror image discloses "a face that tomorrow's sun will touch without mercy."

In a rhythmic, onomatopoeic elegy Heavenly also laments the loss of her youth. The operation, she says in scene 1 of act 2, "cut the youth out of my body, made me an old childless woman": "Dry, cold, empty, like an old woman. I feel as if I ought to rattle like a dead dried-up vine when the Gulf Wind blows." And Aunt Nonnie, Chance's only confidant in St. Cloud tells him the truth about his return: "What you want to go back to is your clean, unashamed youth. And you can't."

Despite its lyric dialogue, Williams thought of the action of this play as realistic, yet sudddenly, just before the play ends, it shifts gears. The closing moments are nonrealistic and poetic. In the hotel room—and what can be more transient to reflect time passing?—Chance and the Princess sit side by side on the bed, directly facing the audience, "like two passengers on a train sharing a bench." The metaphor is that of a train trip, a journey through life. The Princess points out sights along the way:

PRINCESS: . . . Look [Williams's ellipsis]. That little donkey's marching around and around to draw water out of a well. . . .—What an old country, timeless— Look—(*The sound of a clock ticking is heard, louder and louder.*)

CHANCE: No, listen. I didn't know there was a clock in this room.

PRINCESS: I guess there's a clock in every room people live in.

A trooper enters, and Tom Junior is at the door. The Princess pleads, "Come on, Chance, we're going to change trains at this station. . . . So, come on, we've got to go on. . . . Chance, please. . . ." (both Williams's ellipses). But Chance shakes his head, and she departs, as he at last realizes that life is a journey in time and that he is approaching the end of the line.

Yet at the end, with everything gone and violence imminent, defeated Chance retains his dignity, as he asks: "Time—who could beat it, who could defeat it ever? Maybe some saints and heroes, but not Chance Wayne." Williams points out in his stage direction that "Chance's attitude should be self-recognition but not self-pity—a sort of deathbed dignity and honesty apparent in it." As Tom Junior and three other men hover in the

doorway, ready to strike, Chance advances to the front of the stage and addresses the closing lines directly to the audience: "I don't ask for your pity, but just for your understanding—not even that—no. Just for your recognition of me in you, and the enemy, time, in us all."

In the 1959 Broadway premiere Geraldine Page as the Princess and Paul Newman as Chance were outstanding in evoking the poetry of the play and in preserving the magic of the final scene. In a 1945 interview Williams had asserted that "the poetic theater needs . . . more fine, intuitive actors. . . . We've gotten into the habit, actors in the Broadway theater, of talking like parrots. And poetry dies through that form of delivery.

Although director Elia Kazan did well with the realistic scenes, Page's and Newman's own considerable talents were responsible for realizing the poetry and the magic that made the production memorable. Their familiarity with Williams's characters no doubt helped, as they had already achieved outstanding interpretations as Alma in *Summer and Smoke* and as Brick in the movie version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. In a role allegedly based on actress Tallulah Bankhead, Page brought out every facet of the part, quick-silver in her changes from imperious to pathetic, from brittle and determined to resigned and caring. Newman was equally impressive as Chance, his underlying desperation perceptible beneath the bravado.

Good newspaper reviews the following morning of 11 March led to long lines at the box office, with Brooks Atkinson of the *Times* pronouncing the play one of Williams's "finest dramas." "Williams Drama Attracts Throngs" was the Times headline. Magazine reviewers were somewhat more critical. Harold Clurman, commenting on the curtain speech, asked: "What is it we were asked to recognize in ourselves? That we are corrupted by our appetite for the flesh and clamor of success? That we are driven to live debased existences by the constrictions and brutality which surround us? That the sound instincts of our youth are thus frustrated and turned to gall? And that we have an inordinate fear of age, for the passing of time makes us old before we mature?" Marya Mannes deplored the "violence of corruption and decay. . . in which a poet's imagination must feed on carrion." In a more reasoned consideration of the play Robert Heilman feels there is insufficient sympathetic development of the character of Chance, which resembles that of Brick, in that both men experience a "premature glory," which then fades. Interpreting Chance's actions as "so shallow and preposterous that the self-recognition is hardly plausible in terms of character," Heilman wonders how the ending can work, when Chance addresses the audience "like the Doctor in the morality play." But for the audience in the theater the ending *does* work.

The 1962 film, written and directed by Richard Brooks, at least preserves the performances of Geraldine Page and Paul Newman as well as some of Williams's dialogue in their scenes together. Yet the banal new dialogue and the flashback scenes detailing the love affair between Chance and Heavenly (Shirley Knight) reduce the work to an average movie, with an ending that negates the premise. Williams complained that the happy ending was "a total contradiction to the meaning of the play."

Sweet Bird of Youth represents Williams at his best in combining realism, lyricism, and theatricalism. The characters are so realistically drawn, down to the last detail, that their names have become tags for real-life types—a Southern politician who wins votes by appealing to fears of racial discord is a "Boss Finley," a good-looking young man who expects to succeed without talent, a "Chance Wayne." At the same time, Williams's universal theme, expressed in symbolism, stage effects, and heightened speech, unites with his sure sense of theatricality to produce a work that enriched both his reputation and that of the American theater.

Source: Alice Griffin "*Sweet Bird of Youth*," in *Understanding Tenessee Williams*, Matthew J. Bruccoli, General Editor, University of South Carolina Press, 1995, pp., 197-215.

Critical Essay #3

In the following critique, reviewer John Lahr discusses how Williams' Sweet Bird of Youth *displays the subtleties between achievement and destruction and expresses Williams' fascination with America's competitive drive.*

Sweet Bird of Youth (1959), currently being revived at the Royal National Theatre, in London, picks up Williams' story at the panicky moment of the hardening of his spiritual arteries. In *Sweet Bird of Youth*, the most underrated of his great plays, two self-confessed monsters, Chance Wayne and the Princess Kosmonopolis, a.k.a. Alexandra Del Lago, act out the division in Williams' warped heart between being big and being good. The sense that time is running out on the Princess's career and, as his name implies, on Chance's opportunity is what gives the play its peculiar giddy climate of frenzy. Richard Eyre's vivid but unsubtle production— what might be considered an acrylic version— nonetheless allows us to see the grandeur of Williams' writing and to appreciate how much of America's competitive ethos he explores in his idiosyncratic meditation on the monstrous. "I'm a peculiar blend of the pragmatist and the Romanticist and the crocodile," Williams said in 1973. "The Monster." The notion of monsters crops up first in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), when Maggie admits that in her struggle to survive she has mutated, "gone through this—*hideous!—transformation*, become —*hard! Frantic!—cruel!!*" And in *The Night of the Iguana*, the last great play in the Williams canon, the monster—the eponymous iguana—is literally at the end of its tether under the veranda of Maxine's Costa Verde Hotel, trying "to go on past the end of its goddam rope," Shannon says. "Like *you!* Like *me!*" The iguana is eventually freed; but Williams never was. *Sweet Bird of Youth*, set on Easter morning, is a kind of resurrection play—a day-dream of atonement, in which Williams faces up to the sin of his separation from others and the dilemma of lost goodness.

The word "monster" has its root in the contrary notions of marvels and warnings; and *Sweet Bird of Youth* probes the ambiguities between achievement and destruction. "We are two monsters, but with this difference between us," the Princess, a movie star on the run from the imagined failure of her Hollywood comeback film, says to Chance, her young "pitiful monster," who is attempting a comeback of his own, by blackmailing her into being his ticket to theatrical fame and fortune. "Out of the passion and torment of my existence I have created a thing that I can unveil, a sculpture, almost heroic, that I can unveil, which is true." Here Clare Higgins' husky voice and ravaged face invest the Princess's panic and vanity with a compelling ferocity. Dazed and demented, the Princess sprawls on the silk sheets of the hotel double bed, squinting at her gigolo through cracked eyeglasses. "Well," she says, in a line resounding with a lived sense of rapacity and loneliness, "I may have done better, but God knows I've done worse." Higgins isn't always so successful at finding the humor in the Princess's knowing detachment— partly because she lacks a star's deadly imperialism, and partly because there's no chemistry between her and Robert Knepper, who, as Chance, hasn't a whiff of sex or loss about him. This results in some strange readings. "Monsters don't die early," the Princess says, hectoring Chance. "They hang on long. Awfully long. Their

vanity's infinite, almost as infinite as their disgust with themselves." Higgins punctuates these cauterizing lines with a wiggle of her hips.

Sweet Bird of Youth, which dramatizes Chance's twenty-four-hour return to the Gulf Coast town where the legend of his youth began and where it will end, is full of mordant commentary on the soul's decay. "The age of some people can only be calculated by the level of . . . rot in them," Chance says to the Princess. "And by that measure I'm ancient." The cavernous darkness that fills the stage at curtain rise is the perfect ambience for the immensity of shame they're in retreat from. Anthony Ward's monumental louvred bedroom shutters, which reach from floor to ceiling, make the point as spectacularly as Williams' poetry. The characters long to be redeemed from their dead hearts. "Once I wasn't this monster," the Princess says to Chance, surprised to find herself feeling "something for someone besides myself" and momentarily looking to him for salvation. "Chance, you've got to help me stop being the monster that I was this morning, and you can do it." She is a big winner in the American sweepstakes who is terrified of losing; he is a big loser who is terrified that he'll never win. She is trying to hide from the memory of achievement; he is trying to manufacture achievements to hide in. Together, they are a kind of psychological composite of Williams. "Somehow we Americans have never stopped fighting," Williams said, in 1958, of the corruption brought on by the fever to win. "The very pressure we live under, the terrific competitive urge of our society brings out violence in the individual. We need to be taught how to love. Already we know only too well how to hate."

Sweet Bird of Youth is really Chance's story, but the play's flawed structure skews the focus. In an attempt to give a larger dimension to Chance's relationship with his beloved childhood sweetheart, Heavenly (who has to be sterilized because of his betrayal), and to give more coherence to Chance's ultimate fate—his castration by the henchmen of Heavenly's draconian father, Boss Finley—Eyre has boldly assembled his production script from seven drafts of the play. The retooling is generally effective (although giving the role of Heavenly to Emma Amos, who is neither delicate nor believable, cancels out much of the narrative gain). Eyre deserves enormous credit for having mounted three major Williams revivals since he took over as director of the Royal National Theatre, in 1988. "I think the neglect of Williams by the British theatre, let alone the American theatre, has been absolutely shameless," he told me. "I deeply underrated Williams. I didn't see him in the way that I do now, as a moralist and the best writer of English prose in the theatre of this century." The prose is wonderful; but, having tampered with the script, Eyre is oddly timorous about adapting Williams' stage directions, and, as Williams instructed, allows Chance and the Princess to speak their long arias to the audience, and not to each other. This may be Williams' scenic way of indicating the isolation of two major-league narcissists, but it bogs down the play's momentum. As if to recoup it, the production mistakes agitation for desperation.

But there is no mistaking Williams' dream of salvation. At the finale, the Princess, forced by Chance to call a Hollywood gossip columnist on his behalf, learns that her film is a hit. In that instant, she is reborn Alexandra Del Lago, "redeemed" by fame to her former invulnerability. She immediately forgets about Chance. Her vainglorious volteface is hilarious and lethal. The kingdom of self is reasserted, and the monstrous invoked once

again. "I climbed back alone up the beanstalk to the ogre's country where I live, now, alone," she says to Chance, who refuses to be part of her entourage and to leave with her, despite Boss Finley's threats on his life. The parade has passed Chance by, as the Princess reminds him. "Chance," she says, "you've gone past something you couldn't afford to go past; your time, your youth, you've passed it. It's all you had, and you've had it." Chance, who has been notoriously irresponsible—he arrives in town unaware of his mother's death or Heavenly's operation —now owns up to his dereliction. He stops running, and chooses not "the spurious glory" of the Princess—the kind of fame he first glimpsed as a Broadway chores boy in "Oklahoma!"—but the Christian glory of self-sacrifice. In Eyre's production, Chance's pill-popping and manic behavior make his decision to stay and face down his tormentors more resigned than heroic. "Something's got to mean something," Chance says, in a line unfortunately cut from Eyre's production. The castration— what Williams referred to in a letter to Kazan as "the quixotic, almost ridiculous choice, to stay and atone"—is a kind of leap of faith: an expression of Williams' own longing to reclaim his belief. Eyre's production emphasizes the sacrificial nature of the act by having the Boss's men advance on Chance with torches. While Chance's back is to us, his arms shoot out from his body as if he were crucified; and as the lights fade he falls backward with his pelvis thrust upstage at the approaching mob.

Salvation was easier for Williams to create in his plays than in his life. Drugs, drink, and dementia eroded much of his power of penetration and organization in the particularly chaotic period between 1964 and 1969, which he called his "Stoned Age." After that, what remained to him was his "left-over life," a gradual attenuation of friendships and of energy. "I feel like a sinking ship," he wrote his new agent, Bill Barnes, in 1973, "but things have a habit of going on." When his plays could no longer find a receptive audience, Williams put himself and his moral drama directly before the public. Asked to explain his conversion to Catholicism, he said, "I wanted to have my goodness back." But he never really regained it. "To the world I give suspicion and resentment mostly," he wrote in 1980, in the introduction to his collected short stories. "I am never deliberately cruel. But after my morning's work, I have little to give but indifference to people. I try to excuse myself with the pretense that my work justifies this lack of caring for almost everything else. Sometimes I crack through the emotional block. I touch. I hold tight to a necessary companion. But that breakthrough is not long lasting. Morning returns, and only work matters again." Williams' particular poignancy is that he saw the light but didn't want it enough.

Source: John Lahr, "The Fugitive Mind," in *New Yorker*, Vol. 70, No. 21, July 1994, pp. 68-71.

Critical Essay #4

In the following review of Tennessee Williams's play Sweet Bird of Youth, *author Foster Hirsch gives an overview of the work and writes that while it is sloppily constructed, it remains "absorbing on a superficial level."*

Sweet Bird of Youth is a Southern Gothic horror story in which a sexually errant male is both punished and deified. Chance Wayne is a gigolo who sells his body in exchange for promises of stardom. As his name blatantly indicates, though, his chances are waning; and at the awkward transitional age of thirty, he grasps with increasing desperation for the movie star fame that eludes him. When we first see him, he is in the middle of his most fevered scheme, playing the male nurse to a fading actress, and prepared to blackmail her (for possession of hashish) into pushing him and his girlfriend into the movies.

Chance is one of Williams's desperate dreamers, a good-looking small town boy whose ambitions exceed his talent. Like many Williams characters, he is trying to hold on to the fleeting "sweet bird of youth." Traveling with aging prima donna Alexandra del Logo, Chance returns to his home town of Saint Cloud expecting to find it exactly as he left it. He soon learns that the memory of his former glories has dimmed. His mother has died, his girl's father won't let him see her; Chance returns home a fallen hero, and like Val Xavier in *Battle of Angels*, he is pursued and finally destroyed by the town rednecks. Chance's emphatic sexual presence is a threat to the men of the town, and like Val, Chance is regarded as a diseased intruder who must be expelled in order to insure the health of the community.

The character is so beleaguered that he himself comes to think that he deserves his awful fate, offering himself to his pursuers as a kind of sacrificial victim. Immediately before he is castrated by them, he speaks directly to the audience: "I don't ask for your pity, but just for your understanding— not even that—no. Just for your recognition of me in you, and the enemy, time, in us all." Many critics were puzzled by the character's request, for Chance is not convincing as an Everyman. Robert Brustein charged:

Since Chance has had about as much universality as a character in an animated cartoon, to regard his experience as an illuminating reflection of the human condition is a notion which borders on the grotesque. For *Sweet Bird of Youth* is a highly private neurotic fantasy which takes place in a Terra Incognita quite remote from the terrain of the waking world.

Williams treats his Adonis as both the purest and the most depraved character in the play. Chance is both childlike innocent and tortured self-flagellant, both pagan sensualist and Christian sinner. He laments the loss of the innocence he had when he and his girl Heavenly were young, unashamed lovers; and yet he celebrates his vocation ("maybe the only one I was truly meant for") as a professional lover: "I gave people more than I took. Middleaged people I gave back a feeling of youth. Lonely girls? Understanding, appreciation! An absolutely convincing show of affection. Sad people,

lost people? Something light and uplifting! Eccentrics? Tolerance, even odd things they long for." Though he is self-loathing at times, Chance nonetheless feels he is superior to Heavenly's dictatorial father Boss Finley: "He was just called down from the hills to preach hate. I was born here to make love."

Chance, then, is both healer and destroyer; his body soothes the lonely and the no longer young just as it has infected Heavenly, for Chance is an Adonis who spreads venereal disease. (As Kenneth Tynan noted: "None of Mr. Williams's other plays has contained so much rot. It is as if the author were hypnotized by his subject, like a rabbit by a snake, or a Puritan by sin.")

Chance is guilty because he has robbed Heavenly of her innocence and her womanhood (she has had to have a hysterectomy as a result of the disease Chance passed on to her) and because he has squandered his own youth on a succession of onenight stands with strangers. He regards his punishment as only just, and the courage he shows in the face of catastrophe is dearly meant to vindicate him. As John Hays has written, he "ironically gains in manliness at the moment he faces the loss of his manhood." Chance is cleansed by willfully surrendering himself to castration. The play thus equates castration with resurrection—"a very personal and psychological resurrection," as Hays notes, rather than "the spring-time renewal of fortune Adonis was credited with."

Typically for Williams, as Arthur Ganz has suggested, it is only after the character "has been punished and destroyed [that he can] be revered." The punishment, though, is not consistent with Williams's celebration of Chance as a healer and restorer. Robert Brustein pointed out the contradiction: "The bird not only represents purity but. . . the male sexual organ. If the bird is a phallic image, then Chance's sweetness and youth are associated with sexuality. . . and his purity is terminated only when he is castrated, not when he turns to more perverse pleasures."

Chance is both Christ crucified for our sins (as the final speech makes clear) and Adonis, the unashamed, joy-creating god of fertility. Williams's play is both Christian fable and pagan myth. The play's unresolved conflicts are derived from the author's private neuroses, but he is showman enough to convert his personal obsessions into exciting melodrama. Although Williams tries to give the story religious significance, at heart *Sweet Bird of Youth* is a glossy shocker about sex and politics.

The hero may be the protagonist of both a popular romance and a symbolic religious pageant, but the play's two supporting characters, Alexandra del Lago and Boss Finley, are rooted firmly on the level of garish melodrama. Alexandra is such a rich character part that it is possible to overlook the fact that she is incidental to both the story and theme. Her try for a comeback, we learn, was disastrous because Alexandra del Lago at forty-seven has too many wrinkles to attempt the kinds of parts that made her a star when she was young. As she enters the play, she's on the run from her unsuccessful new career, and she's determined to forget failure through hashish and Chance. But improbably, Alexandra finds out that her comeback was not the fiasco she has imagined it was, and she is once again a star. In a flash, she forgets her promises to Chance, and

she is on her way back to Hollywood. Williams elaborates the actress's role in the play much more than he needs to. Aside from eliciting his life story from Chance, Alexandra is necessary only as a thematic reinforcement of Chance's lust for success and his fear of growing older. Both characters regard time as the enemy; the actress "knew in her heart that the legend of Alexandra del Lago couldn't be separated from an appearance of youth." Aware of the corruption of these two characters, Williams nevertheless sympathizes with them; typically, he wants both to punish them and to save them.

His feelings about Boss Finley are much less complicated. Williams claims he was unsuccessful with Finley because he hated him so much: "I have to understand the characters in my play. . . . If I just hate them I can't write about them. That's why Boss Finley wasn't right. . . because I just didn't like the guy, and I just had to make a tour de force of his part in the play." But like Alexandra, Boss Finley is a wonderfully outgoing character. He is a backwoods politician who savors his power; and he is a fraud who is used to having his own way. He forces his defiled daughter Heavenly to stand before his constituents as a symbol of virginal Southern maidenhood. The old man resembles Chance in thinking of himself as a healer: "I have told you before, but I will tell you again. I got a mission that I hold sacred to perform in the Southland. . . . When I was fifteen I came down barefooted out of the red clay hills. . . . And what is this mission? . . . To shield from pollution a blood that I think is not only sacred to me, but sacred to Him." Williams uses Hollywood glamor and Southern bigotry as tokens of universal corruption, but his treatment of movies and politics as tainted pursuits is too sketchy to serve a serious symbolic function.

Sweet Bird of Youth is tawdry and carelessly constructed. The first two acts have little connection to each other as the action moves disjointedly from Chance and Alexandra to Boss Finley; act 2 ends with a chaotically dramatized political rally; and in act 3, the destinies of Chance and Alexandra are uneasily integrated. But the play has vitality, and this gaudy story of movie stars and Southern demagogues is absorbing on a superficial level.

Source: Foster Hirsch, "Three Dark Plays," in *A Portrait of an Artist: The Plays of Tennessee Williams*, 1979 Kennikat Press, pp. 58-62.

Adaptations

Sweet Bird of Youth was adapted as a film in 1962. This version was directed and written by Richard Brooks. It stars Paul Newman as Chance Wayne, Geraldine Page as Alexandra del Lago, and Ed Begley as Boss Finley.

Another film version was made in 1987. It was directed by Zeinabu Irene Davis.

A made-for-television version was filmed in 1989. It stars Mark Harmon as Chance Wayne, Elizabeth Taylor as Alexandra del Lago, and Cheryl Paris as Heavenly Finley.

Topics for Further Study

Compare and contrast the character and motivations of Chance Wayne in *Sweet Bird of Youth* with Val Xavier in *Orpheus Descending* (1956). What kinds of pressures are the young men under and how do they handle them?

Research racial politics in the South in this time period. Was the castration of an innocent African American in the play realistic? Would such a crime have been prosecuted? How has the political situation in the South changed since this time period?

Compare and contrast *Sweet Bird of Youth* with the film *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). Consider how both the play and the film focus on movie starlets dealing with issues of aging. How do the different artistic forms affect content?

Research the psychology of people who heckle politicians, entertainers, and other public figures. Why do they heckle? Is heckling an effective means of getting a point across?

Compare and Contrast

1959: Political use of television is still in its infancy, though it soon becomes a major force in elections.

Today: The power of the internet is still limited for politicians, but is expected to become a big factor in the coming years.

1959: There are limited roles for older actresses in Hollywood movies, primarily mother and grandmother-type roles.

Today: While there is a still an emphasis on youth in Hollywood, there is a greater variety of roles for older women in movies, reflecting the many roles women play in society.

1959: Images of sex and violence are limited in the movies, in part because of a code that restricts such images.

Today: While there is a movie ratings system in place, there are only tenuous limits on how sex and violence are depicted.

1959: Sexually transmitted diseases are diagnosed and treated in both men and women, though many, especially young women, are not taught how to avoid getting them.

Today: Because of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and better sexual education, many young women (and men) are aware of the possibilities of sexually transmitted diseases and know how to avoid getting them.

What Do I Read Next?

Suddenly Last Summer, a play written by Williams in 1958, shares thematic and dramatic concerns with *Sweet Bird of Youth*.

The Little Foxes, a play written by Lillian Hellman in 1939, concerns rivalries and disloyalties in a southern family.

Orpheus Descending, a play written by Williams in 1956, has themes and characters similar to *Sweet Bird*.

Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil: A Savannah Story, a novel by John Berendt published in 1994, also concerns sexual mores and eccentrics in the South.

The Enemy Time is a play by Williams published in *Theatre* in March 1959. This one-act play was an early version of *Sweet Bird of Youth.*

Further Study

Griffin, Alice, *Understanding Tennessee Williams*, University of South Carolina Press, 1995.

This critical study offers in-depth discussion and analysis of a number of Williams's plays, including *Sweet Bird of Youth*.

Nelson, Benjamin, *Tennessee Williams: The Man and His Work*, Ivan Obolensky, Inc., 1961.

This critical biography includes a discussion of Williams's plays through the beginning of the 1960s, including *Sweet Bird of Youth* .

Williams, Tennessee, *Memoirs*, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1975.

This autobiography encompasses Williams's life and career.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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